

“I Think therefore...”

Nietzsche’s Theory of Consciousness



It is always hard to begin a philosophical essay as this, because there will always be a necessary exposition of the concepts discussed. It is possible to write without the exposition, but the work immediately becomes more inaccessible and less clear. Though, we must begin.

1. Descartes and Idealism

In Descartes, there is the famous proclamation “I think therefore I am” (*cogito ergo sum*), and it supposes that there is one central truth in our world, *ourselves*. We may doubt everything in our experience for a variety of reasons. For instance, there are many times our senses have deceived us, correct? Who’s to say that they are not deceiving now? You dream quite a bit, don’t you? Within your dreams, you have been convinced of their apparent reality, but in the end it was a farce. Who’s to say you are not asleep now, and all that is real is false? These are simple propositions that most of us have probably thought about, but do not let its simplicity fool you; these questions allow us to do one thing: doubt everything. Technically, within the context of these questions of reality, we can never be absolutely sure of the apparent world because there’s always the possibility of its falseness. Now, certainty of the senses has been lost.

As a quick antidote, Descartes finds the ultimate *a priori*¹:

“So that after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it.”

— René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*

In Descartes’ search for certainty, he found one constant in all of his doubts: *the Subject!*² In all of our doubts, there must be a being that is doubting; there must be a thinking being attached to all of my experiences.³ Every experience we have has one common trait, it is perceived and simultaneously thought through us. But thoughts are to

¹ A Priori - prior to everything else; necessary; unable to be doubted; certain

² Subject - the philosophical word for the perceiving and thinking being (though being is used more metaphysically and not merely materially)

³ “The ‘I think’ must be able to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all, which is as much as to say that the representation would either be impossible or at least would be nothing for me.” — Immanuel Kant

an extent actions, correct? And for action to have happened there must be an acting being. So fundamentally we are a being that acts through thinking, a thinking being.

So modern philosophy gets its subject, literally and figuratively. An idea so fundamental that it is still being dissected to this day. Though who can blame philosophy? The idea is something direct and core to our experience of reality (nobody denies thoughts). Whatever happens occurs in thought, and thoughts need a thinking being, to Decartes and the later idealists, your subjectivity is what constitutes your existence. Yes, your body is a part of your being, but it is not an essential feature. Though more immediate sensation, our body is still sensed and is therefore doubtable, but again, our core remains. A mind with no body, and you find a physically powerless man; a body with no mind? *There is no man*.

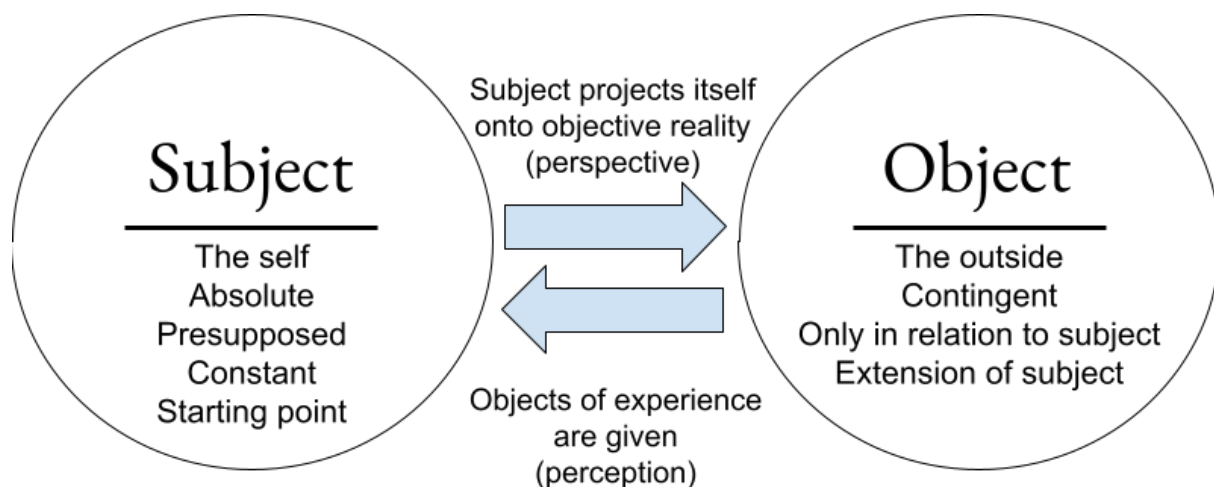


Figure 1. An illustration of basic idealist views on subject/object distinction

Thus is the “copernican revolution” of Kant’s transcendental idealism. We are no long beings that rely upon the outside world. Influence isn’t a one-way street. Yes, we do conform to the changing world outside of us, but the world outside of us conforms to us as subjects. Everything must be interpreted through thought, and to Kant, thought is rule based. It has limits (space and time; transcendental questions) and possibilities (categories of reason). Even without knowing Kant’s arguments for thought’s essential architecture, it is apparent that human minds are biased in all sorts of ways (evolutionary and ideological). As much as we are projected on by the outside world, we project onto it just as much.

Though overall, in every formulation, we find the centrality and apodictic nature of the “subject”. The thinking *being*.

2. Nietzsche's Challenge

After Fredrick Nietzsche died at the turn of the 20th century, his notebooks were compiled into a final tomb: *The Will to Power*, though unfinished, a place of intense speed and thought. But within this incomplete text there is set up for a theory of consciousness from Nietzsche. This is where we will begin:

“‘Something is thought, therefore there is something that thinks’: this is what Descartes’ argument amounts to. But this is tantamount to considering our belief in the notion “substance” as an “a priori” truth:—that there must be something “that thinks” when we think, is merely a formulation of a grammatical custom which sets an agent to every action. In short, a metaphysico-logical postulate is already put forward here—and it is not merely an ascertainment of fact.... On Descartes’ lines nothing absolutely certain is attained, but only the fact of a very powerful faith.”

— WTP⁴

We begin with the deconstruction of Descartes’ formula: Descartes sees thoughts and assumes there must be an agent that commits said thoughts. To Nietzsche, the idea of an agent or “doer” of thought is an assumption built upon linguistic habit. To Nietzsche, the subject is a product, not some core that everything is built around. The subject still subjectifies things (makes things their own), but the idea of a unitary, rigid subject is dogmatic. In short, the subject is not an atomistic “soul” in which every thought and sensation follows. Instead, the subject is an *epiphenomenon*, something that is constructed by and after experience.

A good bit of my readers will look at Nietzsche’s idea of the produced subject and still wonder: “what’s the point?” After all, these are just two philosophers who disagreed upon the implications of some syllogism. And yes, that is true, but Nietzsche draws multiple conclusions from his idea of consciousness:

- I. Free will is absolutely false and none of our experiences belong to us
(against humanism)
- II. Our idea of “substance” only comes from our idea of subject
(against metaphysics)
- III. The mind is not unity, but *multiplicity*
(against psychology)
- IV. There is no way to analyze conscious itself; there is no internal mechanism
(against phenomenology)

⁴ “WTP” denoting Nietzsche’s text *The Will to Power* (1901)

I. Free Will and the Consciousness “Afterward”

Throughout his works, Nietzsche talks extensively of “false causes” and the errors that follow. Now, which causes he’s discussing depends on the work in particular, but it is undeniable that the ultimate false cause in his work is that of the cause from consciousness (free will). Just reading his works casually, one can immediately see that Nietzsche had very little sympathy for any idea of human freedom, in any shape or form.

“Today we no longer have any pity for the concept of “free will”: We know only too well what it really is—the foulest of all theologians’ artifices, aimed at making mankind “responsible” in their sense, that is, dependent upon them.”

— TI⁵

We will start with the most obvious critique of free will that the epiphenomenal concept of consciousness provides. Consciousness is *after* thoughts, feelings, and actions. If the subject is constituted by thoughts, feelings, and actions, how can the subject produce any of those things? How can the product produce its conditions? Consciousness has done none of those things. It cannot feel, will, or move anything.

“And as for the ego! That has become a fable, a fiction, a play on words: it has altogether ceased to think, feel, or will!”

— TI

The subject (or as Nietzsche sometimes puts it, the “ego”), is merely an experiencer. We cannot truly do anything. Ourselves as subjects are not “thinking beings”, but more beings of thought. We are constituted by experiences of feelings, thoughts, and *decisions*, but none of those things are ours to produce. The creator of all the things we take to be ours is merely our body, our physicality. To Nietzsche, consciousness is nothing but a produced specter, experiencing a body, pretending to be in control. Consciousness sees events in the body and goes “ah yes, that is *my* action”.

“We have believed in the will as cause to such an extent that we have from our personal experience introduced a cause into events in general (i.e., intention a cause of events—).”

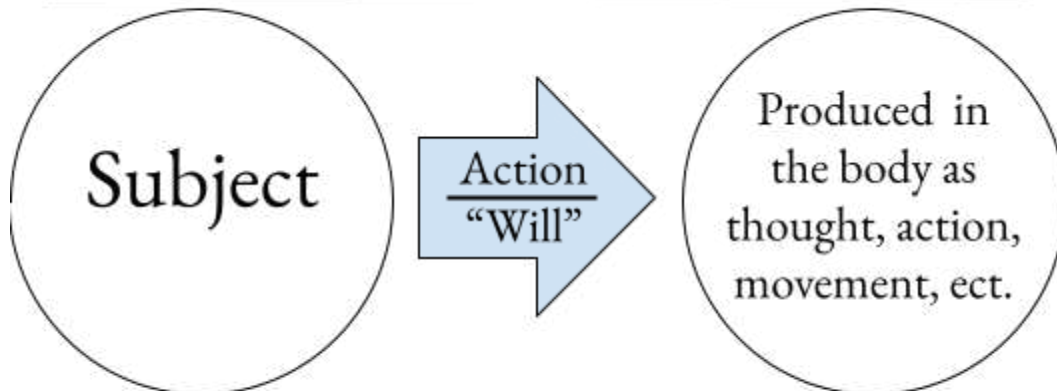
— WTP

Though the errors of false causes are also, as alluded to earlier, errors of false chronology. Intuitively, we believe every act and thought sprouts from ourselves as subject. In a sense, we believe our subjectivity and consciousness to be essentially

⁵ “TI” denoting Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols* (1889)

productive. Though Nietzsche is quick to point out that it is not “consciousness” that is productive, but the body. What is consciousness anyway? Simple definitions proceed as such: “a state of being aware of the world and oneself”; though this definition is very telling since it says nothing of action, *only awareness*. Consciousness is only aware of the body, it is no influence.

Humanist model of the Productive Consciousness



Nietzschean Model of the Productive Body

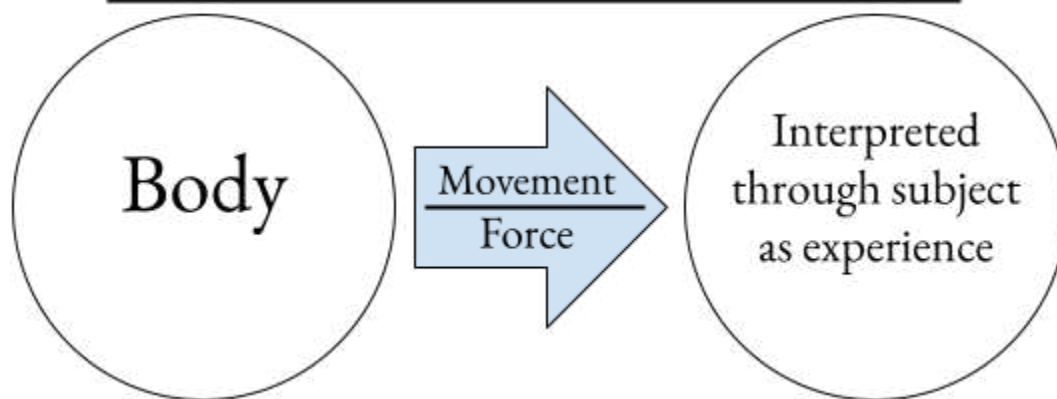


Figure 2. An illustration of the Humanist model of consciousness and Nietzschean model of body

II. Substance and Its Shattering

As a bit of a prelude, we must discuss Nietzsche's "hammer", and the method that goes along with it. Though only really utilized at the beginning of his master work *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche's hammer can be felt throughout his work. The hammer is a tool of critique for Nietzsche and very much mirrors a type of Socratic Method. Though there is one main difference: Socrates sought to find forms (the fundamental characteristics of things), while Nietzsche sought to *destroy* forms. The hammer must be tapped onto every concept, and the ones found empty must be thrown to history. For complete transparency's sake, we must admit that Nietzsche did not disavow all forms (how would one even operate?); in particular, he utilized forms of "becoming" (change), "will" (force), and "value" (variety of importance).

Though Nietzsche accepts some abstract forms they are usually changing and full in nature. What Nietzsche despises are empty, absolute forms. Along with concepts of being (static terminality), Nietzsche also despised concepts of *Substance*.

Compared to our usual definitions of substance, philosophical substance is distinctly metaphysical. To us in our daily lives, substance is defined dualistically. For one, substance is a material with a consistent structure (wax, water, ink, etc.). Most commonly, we speak of substance abuse, and in these contexts, "substance" is distinctly chemical. In another way, substance is seen as a real constitution ("is there any real substance to your paper?", "how will you substantiate that?", etc.). It is also used chemically in talk of "fundamental substances". For instance, we would say that as organisms our fundamental substance is carbon.

In our metaphysical usage, we actually synthesize both of these contemporary definitions. Philosophical substance is a pure, absolute, constitutional form. For instance, Descartes divided the world into two fundamental substances, extension and thought. In short, he deduced that every external perception (body) had one thing in common: extension; distance; length; space. And on the other hand, our internal perceptions (mind) all had one thing in common: thought (much more vaguely defined). Substances can be defined within themselves, while everything else must be defined by them. Substance can be seen as the most fundamental aspect of something's existence and was most simply defined by Benedict Spinoza as:

"...that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself: in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception."

— The Ethics

This is the conception Nietzsche is fighting against, the independent form of substance. And though it may seem that the idea of the absolute, pure, independently-thought subject is another one of these substances, Nietzsche believes

the opposite to be true. He believes that it is not the subject that is based upon substance, but rather substance that is based upon the subject.

"The concept of substance is a consequence of the concept of the subject: not the reverse!..."

...The subject: this is the term for our belief in a unity underlying all the different impulses of the highest feeling of reality: we understand this belief as the effect of one cause--we believe so firmly in our belief that for its sake we imagine "truth", "reality", substantiality in general.-- "The subject" is the fiction that many similar states in us are the effect of one substratum: but it is we who first created the "similarity" of these states;"

First and foremost, we get Nietzsche's direct argument: The precondition for substance as a concept is none other than the subject ("not the reverse!"). To really understand this argument, let us look back at the epiphenomenal consciousness and its implications. Consciousness is not an absolute source or "soul", but a phantom, produced by experience. With this, we see consciousness as a contingent thing: since consciousness is constituted by experience and it is entirely a whole of its parts. Consciousness is not a herd of thoughts and movements led by the subject; instead it is a pack of thoughts and movements independently existing, and consciousness is merely the spectator.

Nietzsche believes that, in a bit of idealist fashion, we think inside-out when it comes to substance. To him, we are incredibly attached to the idea of consciousness being a core substance. Even before Descartes' syllogism we spoke so reverently of "the soul". Nietzsche sees "the subject" as just a modernized soul. Nietzsche then poses us a hypothetical scenario:

"If we relinquish the soul, "the subject," the precondition for "substance" in general disappears."

Imagine, if you will, that you were to take this idea of an epiphenomenal consciousness seriously. That, in reality, consciousness is just an effect of experience and has no influence in-itself. There is no core to consciousness, it is a shifting set of experiences and perceptions. If we were to have a conception of consciousness that is this unstable, how would we perceive anything being stable? If our consciousness has no being outside of the thoughts that constitute it, and everything we perceive comes through said consciousness, how can any of our perceptions present anything absolute or "true"? How are we able to believe in anything objective if we cannot even believe in ourselves?

Then in a cryptic turn, Nietzsche says this right after:

“One acquires degrees of being, one loses that which has being.”

As paradoxical as this statement may seem (in line with his Heraclidean sympathies), it is actually very clear in its meaning. Within an epiphenomenal consciousness, we do not have absolute existence, but only a relative exist, dependent on the thoughts that constitute us. With this, we only have degrees of being, and with that reality we relinquish anything that has absolute or pure being. We do not believe in unqualified being that exists in-itself, only in a being that exists in gradation.

As a final deconstruction, let us look at what the subject is: the causal “doer” of a body’s thoughts and actions. Most things that happen in a body are due to the subject, so when we analyze a person and their actions we trace them back to a subject. To Nietzsche, we do the same with essential substance; we look at all the effects of something and assume it must come from some singular, essential source (this happens when we try to define beauty, we take all the disparate examples and try to find what they all have in common). When we assume any concept to be stable and essential, we do a disservice to the radically powerful and changing multiplicities that are actually at play.

III. Mind and Multiplicity

Until now, Nietzsche has done a lot of critique, though it has seemingly been without creation. I will remind the reader that this is more an illusion of writing; yes, Nietzsche has thrown a lot of western metaphysics to the side, but this is only a means of creating a new potentiality for the mind and body. Here Nietzsche presents us with his more defined theory of consciousness:

“The assumption of one single subject is perhaps unnecessary; perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity of subjects, whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought and our consciousness in general? A kind of aristocracy of “cells” in which dominion resides? To be sure, an aristocracy of equals, used to ruling jointly and understanding how to command?”

“My hypotheses: The subject as multiplicity”

A consequence of the subject/object divide is that we regard our nature as being different from those things outside of us. For instance, the outside world is dominated by a variety of forces in which the strongest shows through, but for us it is a different story. Yes, our mind does have a field of conflicting forces (emotions), but they can always be overcome by reason, which is separate from emotion; we are unitary beings that have essential faculties. Though Nietzsche strictly disagrees and states that in reality, we are much more similar to the outside world than we like to believe.

“Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm.”

Nietzschean psychology is a battleground of drives and desires with no absolute center (a multiplicity). With this Nietzsche does not disregard the unconscious, rather he reappropriates it. To Freud, the most violent and treacherous desires were unconsciously repressed and sublimated; and to Nietzsche, this still happens, but it isn't seen as desires being repressed or sublimated by a mechanism, but more of forces being controlled by other, more powerful forces. Though there is one major breaking point with Nietzsche and psychoanalysis⁶, that of the symbolic. To psychoanalysts, there are necessary symbols that code how the mind operates; it is machinic and orderly. To Nietzsche, there are only irrational forces that strive for dominance; it is machinic and *chaotic*. Freud's little substances (mother, father) are themselves multiplicities.

⁶ Obviously we are speaking in the retrospective (Nietzsche had never engaged with psychoanalysis directly)